

Preface

Research, and academic activity in general, is always spurred by some initial intuition and curiosity about a particular state of affairs. This book is no exception. In this preface I would like to recount three anecdotes that, to some extent, illustrate my own initial intuitions and act as the incipit to the discussion that ensues in the chapters that follow.

Anecdote 1

Luang Prabang is a small town in Laos whose artistic and natural beauty has in recent years attracted a growing number of travellers, especially after the opening of an international airport. One evening, when I visited the town, I was having something to eat at a typical Southeast Asian outdoor food stall very popular with international travellers. It was normal that there would be about twenty or thirty people of different nationalities eating and talking together. English was used as a lingua franca and conversations were smooth. The owner of the place would occasionally join in while dishing out the food. On that particular evening, while things were proceeding in the usual jovial manner, there was a curious incident of linguistic misunderstanding when a freshly-graduated Englishman asked the owner for some ‘plain water’. The owner looked at his customer with a puzzled expression and asked him if he could speak English. The Englishman, a little annoyed, repeated his request, adding a few decibels to his utterance for the sake of clarity, but still failing to make himself understood by the owner. At that point I decided to intervene and I volunteered to ‘translate’ what the young man was trying to say, and the owner finally understood. My ‘translation’ was not into Lao, but into English. The problem was that the English graduate was using his own local variety of English, popularly known as ‘Estuary English’, and did not seem to be aware that the glottal stop he was producing in the his pronunciation of ‘water’ as /wɔʔə/ made the word totally incomprehensible to the owner of the food stall, thus causing the only instance of communication breakdown of that evening.

Anecdote 2

One day, as I was waiting at a bus stop in the campus of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, I had a short conversation with an undergraduate student from China. I enquired about how he liked Malaysia, and he replied that he felt comfortable, that people were friendly, the weather always warm and the food tasty. The only negative comment to make, he said, was about the English language. I asked him to elaborate, and he said that he did not like the way Malaysians spoke English. I wanted more clarification: did he find it difficult to understand when people spoke to him? He stated he had no problem in that regard. Did people struggle to understand his own English? Again, that was not the case. Still, he was not satisfied with Malaysians' English and he would have preferred to study somewhere where 'official' English was spoken. That place, he explained, was Britain, even though he had never been there and had never spoken to a British person in his life. The fact that he felt linguistically as comfortable as in other aspects of his experience in Malaysia was not important in his judgement. Indeed, in his perception that may well have been a confirmation of Malaysians' sub-standard level of English: since he was convinced that his own English was imperfect, the fact that it seemed to be perfectly adequate in Malaysia must have meant that the people he was interacting with were using equally imperfect English. The place where perfect English was spoken, its real home, was somewhere else, far and unknown.

Anecdote 3

My friend John, an Englishman, was the protagonist in a telling incident while he was spending a few days in France. He went into a shop to buy something and, as he doesn't speak French, he addressed the shopkeeper in English. It was obvious that the shopkeeper was not very pleased and she answered in French and so, in absence of a common language, the transaction proceeded with some difficulty and coldness. A couple of days later John had to go back to the same shop. He was with his Russian wife this time and they were speaking Russian. He turned to the shopkeeper and, forgetting for a moment what language he was speaking, addressed the woman in Russian. The shopkeeper immediately asked if he could speak English and so John said "Da, I can speak English". This time the transaction was friendly and went very smoothly.

These three anecdotes represent three different perceptions of the English language. The first incident is open to interpretations. Some might take it as evidence of the fact that language standards among the English youth

is falling rapidly, and, in support of their conviction, would probably cite linguistic ‘aberrations’ such as those heard at bar counters (“anifink else?”) or read in university undergraduates’ essays (“I would of thought...”). Others might object that many of these are features of a form of English that contributes to group identity and that similar phenomena of what is mistakenly taken to be linguistic deterioration have always occurred in all languages. Others still might see this incident as indicative of native speakers’ poor ability to make themselves understood in international encounters, as is also shown by the prompt wearing of the interpreter’s headphones by English-knowing delegates at European Parliament meetings when some British MEPs are about to speak.

I share the latter interpretation. Some linguists (e.g. Deterding & Kirkpatrick 2006) identify the stress-based rhythm typical of British English as a culprit for its relatively lower intelligibility in international communication. While I agree with this hypothesis, I also think that the matter is also one of attitude, in the sense that some British speakers of English see themselves as the rightful owners of the language by virtue of a ‘genetic’ connection to it. Consequently, they are less willing to accommodate their way of speaking in order to facilitate comprehension and, according to this perception, problems of intelligibility can only be due to the interlocutor’s imperfect command of the language or failure to hear correctly. In the case of the first anecdote, it was clear that this was indeed the case.

Yet, the aspiration to ‘native-like’ proficiency remains high in the priorities of many learners, who see the same ‘genetic’ connection between English, the English and England. This is entirely understandable. The idea that ‘official’ English is only spoken in England is an obvious one in the mind of someone who would like to approximate linguistic perfection. This aspiration is wholly legitimate and it does not matter if it is based on the following myths:

- that one variety of a language may be qualitatively better than other varieties
- that the best variety of a language is the oldest or original one
- that each language or variety has its origin in a country which bears the same name
- that only the inhabitants of that country are the ones who speak that language or variety.

Fundamentally, all these myths derive from a notion of language as object, which is then qualified with an assortment of attributes, such as good, bad, local, original, new, official, British, Malaysian, and so on. As

an object, a language is also something that can owned, accepted, refused. The genetic connection between a language and a particular country and its people also causes sentiments of admiration or resentment.

In the third anecdote, clearly the shopkeeper had nothing against the English language *per se*. Perhaps she was not too fond of English people, but that is a stereotypical assumption that I wish to avoid. I am more inclined to believe that she resented the fact that John was using *his* language in *her* country. When he appeared to be Russian the crucial difference was that English functioned as a lingua franca and its ownership was equally shared between the shopkeeper and the 'Russian' customer. By contrast, in the first encounter the shopkeeper perceived a clear imbalance: language ownership was not equally shared, since for John English was not a lingua franca but his own language. What was more, this language of his had all the power of a world language. The difficulty arose from the shopkeeper's impossibility to reconcile her objectified view of English as a socioculturally located foreign language with its role as a denationalised lingua franca.

As English continues to expand and establishes itself as the international lingua franca of choice, as it is increasingly used as a medium of instruction, and as a growing number of children are brought up learning it from a very young age, the question of its *location* becomes more pressing and the main tenet of this book is that possible answers will have to consider its *relocation*.